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GALDÓS, INTERPRETER OF LIFE

[An address delivered at the *Velada* in honor of Pérez Galdós, New York City, April 13, 1920.]

I am deeply sensible of the privilege and honor which falls to me in being permitted to represent tonight The American Association of Teachers of Spanish. I trust that I may speak not merely in their name, but also in the name of this audience, in the name of all those in this land of ours who love Spain, her people and her art, as I add my modest tribute of admiration and affection in memory of him who for a generation has been the most beloved of all the Spaniards of his time, Don Benito Pérez Galdós.

You have heard tonight from his fellow-countrymen something of his significance in the life and art of his own country. Of that it is not for me to speak. But Galdós is one of those rare figures in the history of men whose genius transcends the limits of his own language and his own generation, whose work becomes a part of the universal inspiration and "general delight of mankind."

Almost without thinking, I find myself applying to his work that phrase with which Cervantes characterized his own masterpiece. And it is significant that so often since the death of Galdós his name has been coupled with that of Cervantes. I do not need to dwell now upon their numerous likenesses. But I cannot fail to call your attention at least to certain traits which they held in common: their understanding of life, their broad sympathy for their fellow-men and their unswerving idealism. In this last quality there is one striking difference, however; the idealism of Cervantes looks backward; it is the sunset reflection of the spirit of an age that was dying, the age of generous enthusiasms which had made Spain the chief power of Europe, the age which had conquered a New World in the name of Christ and the King. The idealism of Galdós looks forward; it is the morning star of a generation that is to come, the harbinger of a new social order.

These traits which are so distinctive in the work of the two great Spaniards deserve a moment's discussion, for they contain, to my mind, the secret of Galdós's universal power to stir men's hearts.

Galdós, like Cervantes, knew life by living it. For half a century he mingled with men of all classes, traveling into every corner of Spain—always in a third-class compartment—stopping at modest

inns, penetrating the simple, daily life of people, and beyond the limits of his own land, visiting the other countries of Europe. Gifted with an uncommon power of observation and a memory which served him when the light had fled from his eyes, he brought to his task a wealth of detail, of the physical aspect of persons and things, of the speech of different types and classes of men, of the elemental psychology of his fellows, which few writers have possessed.

The mere power to observe the exterior manifestations of life is not sufficient to make a great artist. This is after all but an instrument. The great artist must also interpret the spirit of life. And here lies the greatest glory of Galdós.

What are the qualities which equip a writer to interpret this spirit? There are two which seem to me preëminent: the first is sympathy with man, the second is faith in man.

By sympathy I plainly do not mean only the ability to look at life without prejudice, coldly and dispassionately, but rather that instinct to see the other man's point of view, to find his acts and opinions reasonable and natural, even inevitable, or to use a phrase of Ramón Pérez de Ayala's, "to feel that you would have done the same thing, if you were in his place." And is not this in the end the spirit of democracy? It is often said the Spanish are the most democratic of all people. And that is undoubtedly true, if we mean by democracy that sympathetic regard for one's fellows which is the basis of all social equality. Among all of his nation, Galdós has justly deserved the title "The Great Democrat."

Perhaps I should make clearer too what I mean by faith in man, although since I am speaking of the spirit of life, there can be little room for doubt. Obviously I am not thinking of his material welfare, or his animal evolution, but a faith in man's spiritual development, in the ultimate triumph of the imponderable aspects of life, of the eternal ideals.

These, then, are the qualities which Galdós brought to his task. How are they evident in his work? The age which he set himself the task of interpreting was the nineteenth century, retrospectively in the *Episodios*, objectively in the *Novelas contemporáneas*, prophetically in the later semi-mystic novels and the drama. It is an age of pettiness, selfseeking and futility, in Spain as in the rest of Europe. Judged by its achievements, Spain of the nineteenth century is destined to stand in history as a record of unfulfilled aspirations. But as you read its story in the work of

Galdós, you will nevertheless find in it at every point evidences of latent strength which point the way to a new future.

This anomaly, this gap between the vision and the realization, deep-rooted in Spanish life, emerges from every page of his work. In the *Episodios*,—that great national epic of the first half of the past century, none the less epic because its hero is the whole Spanish people rather than a single champion,—it is the contrast between the mighty impulse of a nation for political freedom and the betrayal of that impulse by personal and political selfishness. The cause fails, the high purpose is frustrated. But who can read this mighty poem without being kindled with a new faith in the cause itself, a new confidence in its ultimate triumph?

In the novels of contemporary life, Galdós turned his attention to another phase of modern life, its social problems. And here again, he finds the same anomaly. The world which he paints with such penetrating exactness is a banal one, the great middle class, emerging from the insignificance of the past, evolving into the democracy of the future. Judged by its acts this society is hopelessly decayed; conventionality, bigotry, materialism are dominant. Pepe Rey is the victim of reaction; Fortunata dies an outcast. The Madrid of Torquemada is a cess-pool of vulgarity and selfishness. This, and this only, is the image of modern society which you find in other novelists of the time, such as Leopoldo Alas or Padre Coloma. But it is precisely here that Galdós reveals his greatness. He has seen beneath the surface; there he has found a justification of his faith.

By temperament Galdós belongs to those who conceive life in terms of the emotions. And in his search for these fundamental emotional truths, he turned instinctively to the humble and the obscure, to those who, in the eyes of society, are outcasts, to the dreamers, to little children. There he found still vigorous the qualities which had disappeared from the conventional world. And so his work teems with these finely pathetic figures, like Marianela and Sor Simona, whose chief beauty lies in their primitive simplicity.

It is the contrast between these naïve types and the conventionally respectable folk, which forms one of the chief charms of his work, witness Casandra or "Pepet." Occasionally his propagandist zeal led him to present his sophisticated characters in an unfavorably exaggerated light, but in the greater part of his work there is a broad tolerance and sympathy even for those whose ideas were the

antithesis of his own. At his best, as in *Fortunata y Jacinta*, *Angel Guerra*, or *La loca de la casa*, his vision of life possesses that amplitude and serenity which marks the spirit of the Greek tragedy or of Shakespeare.

Galdós was never one who looked upon his art as a light or frivolous pastime. He felt called to be a teacher. The society which it fell to him to interpret was in many respects degenerate, decadent. But from that society he drew a lesson, for which we—and I mean all those who seek to solve the riddle of life—owe him a debt of eternal gratitude.

That lesson is a simple one, but it is as profound as time; it is the lesson that prophets and seers of all ages have taught. It is this: Despite oppression and tyranny, despite ignorance and idleness, despite selfishness and greed, there are certain eternal verities which are the abiding aspiration of men; the belief in these truths lies latent in the heart of the great mass of the community, aroused into action only in moments of stress; and in this latent consciousness lies the hope of the society of tomorrow.

Freedom, justice, love,—these are his themes. And the greatest of these is love. Again and again in his noblest works he tells the story of this triumphant love, a love that is greater than self, greater than honor, greater than death, the love of which Casandra says: "It is the only divine thing which I feel within me; divine, because it is imperishable, because I cannot conceive that it should cease to be what it is or have an end."

As the years go by I fancy that we shall hear less and less of the purely formal and artistic side of his work, of his place as a realist or a naturalist, of his dramatic technique. For there is something in the man's life and work of far greater moment than these ephemeral questions of school or of form. There is a vision of life.

In the breadth and power of that vision, Galdós stands preëminent in his time. What a glorious irony there is in the fact that he, who was so often counted the enemy of a faith, is the great defender of faith, faith in democracy, faith in justice, faith in the eternal truths, faith in man! This is the message which he preached to a generation groping and bewildered in the seeming hopelessness of life. This, too, when the problems and struggles which form the material background of his work are long forgotten, will remain the enduring lesson of his interpretation of life.

HAYWARD KENISTON